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A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN.

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REPORT NUMBER DR-5-0215-28

PUB DATE

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CONTRACT OEC-5-10-239

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.09 HC-\$0.56 14F.

DESCRIPTORS- *CHILDRENS BOOKS, *STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS, *LITERATURE, *READING INTERESTS, *FOLKLORE BOOKS, CAMBRIDGE, PETER RABBIT

A SCHEME FOR CATEGORIZING THE STRUCTURE OF CHILDREN'S STORIES IS OUTLINED BY THE AUTHOR. THE SCHEME, PARTLY DERIVED FROM THE WORK OF VLADIMIR PROPP, IS DESIGNED TO PROVIDE TESTABLE STATEMENTS ABOUT THE BOOKS AND STORIES CHILDREN PREFER. THE AUTHOR SUGGESTS THAT THERE ARE COMMON DENOMINATORS WITHIN STORIES, SEQUENCES OF ACTION OR REACTION, THAT, NO MATTER HOW MUCH THE SUPERSTRUCTURE MAY VARY, ALWAYS REMAIN THE SAME. IT HAS BEEN FOUND THAT THESE "FUNCTIONS" FOLLOW AN IDENTICAL SET SEQUENCE, THOUGH IN ANY GIVEN TALE SOME FUNCTIONS MAY BE EXCLUDED. BY ASSIGNING SYMEOLS TO THESE FUNCTIONS ONE CAN OBTAIN AN OBJECTIVE COUNTERPART OF ONE DIMENSION OF A STORY. IT IS THEN POSSIBLE TO VARY ONE OF THE FUNCTIONS WHILE HOLDING THE OTHERS CONSTANT. SUCH STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS MIGHT ALSO SHOW SIMILARITIES AMONG TALES NOT USUALLY CATEGORIZED TOGETHER. FOR EXAMPLE, "PETER RABBIT" (1) RECEIVES INSTRUCTIONS NOT TO DO SOMETHING, (2) VIOLATES THE INSTRUCTIONS, AND (3) IS RESCUED FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE VIOLATION. OTHER STORIES FOLLOWING THIS STRUCTURAL SEQUENCE ARE "BABES IN THE WOODS," "LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD," AND "HANSEL AND GRETEL." IT MAY WELL BE THAT CERTAIN STRUCTURAL SEQUENCES APPEAL TO CHILDREN AT CERTAIN AGES, RATHER THAN THE BROAD GENERALIZATIONS OF ANIMAL OR ADVENTURE. WHILE FUNCTIONS ARE ONLY ONE (RELATIVELY CONTROLLABLE) INGREDIENT OF STORIES, AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE FUNCTIONS MAY ASSIST IN ANALYZING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN STORIES AND CHILDREN. (TC)

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Education

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BR-5-0215-28

OEC-5-10-239

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A Structural Approach to the Study of Literature
for Children¹

by

Peter F. Neumeyer

The problem:

Although there exist admirable studies of children's reading preferences, and although these studies contain and lay bare much potentially valuable raw data, the studies and the data seem peculiarly unrelated to each other and are less helpful than one might hope in leading to further experimentation and subsequent practice in the classroom.² Though the best of the studies were conducted on large samples, and used exemplary interviewing techniques, the results are limited either in that they are confined to

examining closely the responses of one child to various "types" of books, or in the nature of their conclusions as to the "types" of books liked by children of given ages. Thus we are left with such over-generalized vacuities as that children like stories of adventure, or stories of animals. And these simplifications, in turn become the basis for the many lists of suggested readings for children.

In addition to the fact that they do not suggest further avenues of exploration into the nature of either children or books, the data and the conclusions seem unhelpful in another respect. For even if children do like adventure stories or animal stories, it is improbable that they should like all stories falling into those categories. It seems obvious that there must be bad, poorly written, inadequate animal or adventure stories that don't appeal to children at all. Similarly, it is obvious that lists of specific books preferred by children do not give a satisfactory base from which one would confidently make generalizations. That youngsters like Peter Rabbit or The Swiss Family Robinson may mean no more than that these two books are written in just the way that happens to hit it off with children.

If one is to begin talking intelligently about books and children, one must set about making true and testable statements about books and children--statements that are neither so sanctimonious and vague as to be useless, and statements which, though specific, are derived from procedures that are both replicable and pregnant with implication for further development.³ One may begin the investigation, as previous workers must have discovered, using as the focus

either the individual child, or the body of literature.

If one begins with the literature itself, it remains to find a critical instrument suitable for giving one a hand-hold in the vast and seemingly diverse mass of books which children enjoy. For this purpose the usual tools of literary criticism, though they seem occasionally to lead one to true statements about specific works, are not the most useful. One may, if one is so inclined, pursue a sophisticated "new critical" reading of Winnie the Pooh, or, as has on occasion been ventured, a Freudian, sexual interpretation of Alice In Wonderland (down the hole after the rabbit), or even a Marxist reading of The Three Little Pigs, but notwithstanding whatever light these readings can shed on the specific works, they do not lead us much further than we were before toward having an instrument with which to talk about children's books in terms like "such and such type books are liked by urban eight-year-olds." Yet that is precisely the sort of statement which, if reliable, would be of great practical help to parents, teachers, and librarians, besides itself being a contribution to literary criticism.

The clue to a direction in which to begin may lie in the word "type" in the last paragraph. What follows is a suggestion for an approach to children's literature--or, books children read--which, though limited, is critically sound, and which may permit us to begin grouping children's books in categories that are not so elusive as to be useless.

"Elusive categories" are something with which students of folklore have become familiar, and so when I propose a way out, the proposal will be in the vein of some current thought

among folklorists.

A possible solution:

As early as 1910, the Finnish folklore scholar, Antti Aarne, attempted to establish a taxonomy of types of the folktale. This work was later expanded into the standard work, the most useful index of Stith Thompson.⁴ There one may find folktales classified under schema such as the following:

A. MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS

A 100 - A 499 GODS

A 200 - A 299 God of the upper world

A 200 God of the upper world

A 210 Sky-god

A 220 Sun-god

A 240 Moon-god

A 250 Star-god

A 260 God of light

A 270 God of dawn

A 280 Weather-god

or

L. REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

L 200 - L 299 MODESTY BRINGS REWARD

L 200 Modesty brings reward

L 210 Modest choice best

L 220 Modest request best

L 250 Modest business plans best

But immensely helpful as it has been to have tales from all over the world so classified, certain drawbacks are apparent. Vladimir Propp (The Morphology of the Folktale, 1928), noted the frequent overlapping of motifs in the motif indexing method. Citing the common division of folktales into fairy tales, tales of everyday life, and animal tales, Propp asked questions such as "Don't tales about animals sometimes contain elements of the marvelous to a very high degree? And conversely, don't animals actually play a large role in fairy tales?"⁵ More recently Propp's objections, and his direction in looking for an answer have been taken up by Alan Dundes.⁶ In arguing the case for a "structural study" of folktales, Dundes began to develop and elaborate a technique and approach having its roots not only in the suggestions of Vladimir Propp, but in the interesting, if short-lived, Russian school of Formalist Criticism.⁷

In essence, it is maintained by the structuralist critic that there are common denominators within stories. One may look for sequences of action or reaction that, no matter how much the superstructure may vary, remain always the same. Thus, said Propp, it does not really matter whether the hero is assigned a difficult task by the king, or by a giant. It does matter that he is assigned a task. And if the hero receives money, that fact too is important, just as it is a critical distinction whether the money is given him and he then buys a magic horse, or the money is given him as a reward for an act of bravery.⁸ In addition to defining certain "functions" that seemed basic to the tales he considered, Propp found, surprisingly, that--at least in his limited sample

of stories--the functions invariable followed an identical setsequence, though of course in any given tale some functions might be excluded. That Propp's "functions" are not what the English teacher generally calls "themes," that the functions are, in essence, more like verbs than like nouns, that they are sequences of action and reaction, rather than "underlying ideas," must be understood.

As was suggested some paragraphs back, what is needed if we wish to learn about the interaction between children and books is a critical instrument that allows us to talk consistently about either children or books. If we talk about the books, then we must, at least at the outset, talk about them the same way, heeding similar and identifiable aspects of the story, and referring to these aspects in agreed-upon terms. And likewise when we later move on to the most difficult consideration of varying responses of different children to different books, we must hold constant as many factors as possible.

Holding constant the aspects of the story necessitates first identifying those aspects. The Propplan enumeration of "functions" is remarkably serviceable even beyond the limits of the hundred folk tales examined by the originator, though there is no reason at all why one might not attempt a similar, though different, labelling or identifying schema if it would be more applicable.⁹

By way of demonstrating the first step, one might schematize Peter Rabbit according to the following Propplan functions:

- | | |
|--|---|
| I. Initial situation | Mrs. Rabbit says "I am going out." (Goes to buy five |
| Absence: One of the members of a family is absent from home. | currant buns, presumably one for each little rabbit). |

Symbol: β
 (β^1 departure of elders)

-
- | | |
|---|--|
| II. Interdiction addressed to the hero. | Actually, in <u>Peter Rabbit</u> , Peter is told not to go into Mr. McGregor's garden just before we are informed that his mother is going away. |
|---|--|
- Symbol: γ^1
 As in "... do not venture forth from the courtyard."

-
- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| III. The interdiction violated. | Peter goes to Mr. McGregor's garden, eating his vegetables. Accidentally comes on Mr. McGregor, who chases Peter. |
|---------------------------------|---|
- Symbol: δ
 (Functions II and III are twin elements).
 "At this point . . . the villain enters the folktale He comes on fast, sneaks up on" (Propp)

-
- | | |
|---------------|---|
| XVI. Struggle | Mr. McGregor's repeated attempts on Peter's life (with sieve, treading on him, and with rake in picture). |
|---------------|---|
- Symbol: H
 The hero and the villain join in direct combat.

-
- | | |
|--------------|---|
| XXII. Rescue | Peter escapes because of his smallness and quickness, |
|--------------|---|
- Symbol: $R\delta^1$

"The hero is rescued from pursuit (sometimes he is saved by lightning fast running)." (Propp)
 (Rs⁴ the hero hides in flight).
 (There is a vestigial Rs⁸,
 "rescue from attempt at being devoured," since Mrs. Rabbit had, during the opening injunction, warned Peter that his Father had an accident and was put in a plea by Mr. McGreggor.

Unfortunately there exists no Proppian symbol signifying the hero being given camomile tea and being put to bed, while his siblings eat blackberries. Perhaps if one designs symbols to schematize children's cautionary tales, one would need one to designate "Expiation for violation of Initial Injunction." But to summarize, for our simple initial purposes, we are able to represent a story like Peter Rabbit as

3
 4
 8
 H
 Rs¹
 (Rs⁴)

Anyone familiar with our method can reconstruct the "deep structure" of the tale, though his dramatic personae might be very different. We have, then, an objective counterpart of

one dimension of the story, and--so it seems to me--for the first time there is the opportunity for conducting replicable "experiments" with children and literature, for example by holding all elements (functions) constant but one, and proceeding to investigate whatever we are investigating. (One might stipulate a Peter Rabbit who ends up in Mr. McGregor's stew pot, or a Peter Rabbit going on an errand to Mr. McGregor's for his mother. And then, by means yet to be devised, one may test the responses of the children).

No doubt the generalizations we will be able to make will be very modest at the beginning, but on the other hand we will be saying real things about children's books, and we will be seeing real similarities and differences. We might find, to our surprise, that the popularity of Peter Rabbit lies not at all in the fact that Peter is an animal, but rather in that a) he is enjoined from a certain action, b) he violates the injunction, and c) he escapes the dire consequences--just barely. And if we consider certain versions of Babes In the Woods, Little Red Riding Hood, or Hansel and Gretel, we may indeed see a very similar structural sequence. And we may at least hypothesize--and test further--whether it is not certain structural sequences that appeal to children at certain ages.

Attractive as the relative manageability of a structural approach is, there are difficulties and objections which have not yet been answered.

The first of the difficulties is that, though one may write a structural analysis of a full-length novel (see note 9), to juggle merely one of the functions as one is testing

with a class of children would seem an unwieldy enterprise. The length of the novel would surely preclude any youngster's reading it twice in only slightly differing form. Moreover, the time it takes to read a novel would allow for the introduction of so many variables (even if two classes of children were used for comparison, so that the reading would only be done once), that again the results would be suspect. But that there exists this difficulty does not invalidate the idea that functions are of signal importance in determining children's responses, and it may be that one must merely begin with shorter works than novels.

The second and more substantive objection was implied by the seminar student who asked why, in testing with children, it was necessary to use novels or stories in the first place. Why not use merely the bare-bones functions?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that one must realize that functions are only one (relatively controllable) ingredient of stories. There still remain all such elusive manifestations as characterization, diction, rhetorical assumptions, and the evanescent matters of "tone" and "texture." And yet, if we understand functions, we may begin to learn about the interaction between stories and children. The warm heart of the story, and the even warmer one of the child, may still be eluding us--and I, personally, hope they will continue to elude us. And yet, if we teach literature to children, and if we do talk of sequence and articulation in curriculum, it behooves us to understand what is understandable, and to attempt to bring some order into an area governed perhaps needlessly by intuition.

1. In the Fall, 1966, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I conducted a seminar the purpose of which was to consider rationales by which literature could be taught to children. I wish to thank the students of that seminar for struggling with me to explore the implications of the main idea of this paper.
2. Among the better known reading-interest studies are, May Lazar, Reading Interests, Activities, and Opportunities of Bright, Average and Dull Children (New York: Teachers College, Columbia, 1937); George W. Norvell, What Boys and Girls Like to Read (Morristown, 1958) and by the same author The Reading Interests of Young People (Boston, 1950); and Carleton Washburne and Mabel Vogel, Winnetka Graded Book List (Chicago, 1926).
3. It is noteworthy that the children's reading preference lists by no means agree with each other, and that Norvell, in fact, takes violent issue with the findings of others.
4. Stith Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk Literature, revised ed. (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955).
5. Propp, p. 5.
6. Alan Dundes, "From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales," Journal of American Folklore, April-June, 1962, pp. 95-105.

7. For a history and brief synopsis of the tenets of Russian Formalism, see Victor Erlich, Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine, second rev. ed. (The Hague, 1965). Also Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, ed. Leo T. Lemon and Marlon J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).
8. Propp, p. 20. A similar direction of thought about "fairy tales" was suggested by John Buchanan in a lecture published as Pamphlet No. 79, The English Association, July 1931.
9. In fact, though, Mr. Miles Wichelns, one of the students in the seminar (note 1), has found the Proppian schema fully satisfactory for representing the sequence of action in Treasure Island. Not only are there symbols for all the actions, but the sequence of action follows that described by Propp as being constant in his Russian tales.